

4. HANDLING RESPONDENT QUESTIONS AND REFUSALS

4.1 Answering Respondent Questions

Throughout your contact attempts, you must be prepared to answer questions respondents may have about the study. During the interview, some respondents may ask for additional information or clarification. You should always be ready to answer the respondent's questions as they arise. Oftentimes, a respondent's decision to participate or not will be based on how well you answer the respondent's questions. Answer the respondent's questions clearly and concisely. Listen to the respondent and answer only what is asked. Additional information may bore the respondent or open up a Pandora's box which could lead to your losing control of the situation.

Respondent's questions are rarely phrased the same as we have noted them in this manual. Some questions may in fact not be questions at all, but rather a rambling response. Some respondents will be quite articulate in expressing their viewpoints, and some may have a great deal of knowledge about the topic under study. Articulate and knowledgeable respondents will perhaps present the most challenging questions.

Whether the question is ill-phrased or well-phrased, you must answer each question with sincerity and directness. By doing so, you will communicate to the respondent a professional attitude and a concern that his/her questions are important. Should you be asked a question that you are unable to answer or where you feel the answer may lead to a refusal, refer the person to your supervisor. This person will be in a better position to answer the respondent's questions.

The materials in this manual and discussions during the training should help you prepare your answers. The responses presented are suggestions; they should not be considered the only suitable responses. They do attempt to offer the viewpoints and items that should be incorporated into your answers.

- *What is this study about?*

The purpose of this study is to ask people who live in Oklahoma for their opinions about important issues facing the state these days.

- *Why did you pick my family/household?*

We are interviewing people who live in Oklahoma. We have scientifically selected a set of addresses from across the state so that the group of people we interview closely matches all the people living in the state. To be sure that our study produces accurate results, it is very important that every selected household take part.

- *Why can't you pick some other family/household to do the interview?*

This is a scientific study that does not allow us to replace any selected household with a different household. If we were to do that, the group of people we interview would not match the entire state.

- *How long will the interview take?*

I will ask a few general questions about the people who live in your household and then I'll scientifically select one adult to be interviewed. The interview takes about 30 to 45 minutes. Participation is voluntary. You may decide to stop at any time, or skip any questions you prefer not to answer. You will be paid \$20 to thank you for your time in helping me today.

- *What will be done with the information I provide?/ How will the survey results be used? /Why should I participate?*

Your answers will help the State of Oklahoma understand how the people of Oklahoma feel about problems affecting the state and what they want done to address those problems.

- *How do I know this is a legitimate research project?*

If you would like to ask any questions of my supervisor, Mike Shea, you can call him at 1-800-937-8281, ext 5195.

- *Who do you work for?*

I work for Westat, a survey research firm in Rockville, Maryland.

4.2 Handling Respondent Refusals

In any survey, there are always some respondents who refuse outright to be interviewed and some who indirectly indicate that they will not participate. While it is usually surprising to new interviewers how many fall in the latter than the former category, it is equally surprising to them how few refusals actually do occur.

The interviewer is probably the major influence on the motivation of the respondent and on the quality of the responses received. If you, as the interviewer, are interested in the study, enthusiastic about your work, and like the respondent, these feelings are usually communicated to the respondent with positive effects.

Identifying why a person may decline to participate if they do not express it explicitly will help you or someone else gain the respondent's cooperation. When you first sense (here the not-so-scientific method of impression may play a major role) some degree of unwillingness on the part of the respondent, it is wise to identify why the person is declining and what positive force can be employed to your advantage.

- Fear of Survey, the Interviewer, Use of the Data

Respondents tend to fear things they don't understand. By having the purpose of the study and what the data will be used for clearly in your mind, you can alleviate the respondent's fears. Some respondents may think you are trying to sell them something, or "casing their house." For any such situations, simply show the respondent your photo I.D. badge (if at the door) and/or provide him/her with your supervisor's telephone number, and suggest s/he call to verify the authenticity of the study and the legitimacy of the organization you represent

- Perceived Invasion of Privacy

It is possible that a respondent is willing to participate in the survey but tells you that s/he is unwilling to discuss certain subject areas. If this should happen and the respondent is adamant about answering questions dealing with certain subject areas, explain to the respondent that you are required to ask every question because they are very important but that if s/he feels very strongly about not answering certain items s/he may refuse when the question is asked.

- Threatening Subject Matter

The information collected in the survey questionnaire should not be threatening to most respondents. However, some questions are more sensitive than others. Reading each question in an even toned manner and not being hesitant yourself can eliminate hesitancy on the respondent's part. The most useful tool you can utilize with sensitive subject matter is the communication of a relaxed and non-threatening display of interest. If you find that some questions are eliciting refusals for more than one respondent bring this to the attention of your supervisor.

- Hostility Towards the Sponsor

If the respondent is hostile toward government funded surveys or the Oklahoma State government, you may want to reiterate the general purpose of the survey. You can also tell the respondent that his/her views and experiences may get overlooked if/she decides not to participate in the survey.

It is always helpful to preface a rebuttal to a respondent's objection with a token agreement or understanding of his/her viewpoint, e.g., "I can understand that," or

“You certainly have a right to feel that way.” That takes the respondent off the defensive and usually works as well as a more detailed rebuttal.

- Cost in Time and Energy

The timing of the interview, may also affect the respondent’s participation. Contacts with the respondent immediately before dinner or at the bedtime hour are likely to meet with little success and often be resented. Given the variety of living patterns and habits it is difficult to establish concrete rules about the best hour of contact. Should you make contact at an inconvenient hour, or if the respondent becomes annoyed with you as a result of this contact, quickly and apologetically back off and attempt to make contact at a time more convenient for the respondent.

In summary, just as one respondent differs from another, the reasons for refusals are many and varied. As we have stated, some respondents will not refuse outright, but may express some hesitancy, reservations, or initial hostility. In a short time, you will become sensitive to how firm a “no” you are receiving by the tone or wording of the respondent’s comments. When you begin to sense reasons behind hesitancy, you should develop ways to reassure the respondent.

If you find you are not getting anywhere with the respondent, try to hang up or leave the household before you get the final “no”. It just may be a bad time or bad day. Attempt to come back at another day and time, and contact another household member, when possible.